

The Meaning of ADULT EDUCATION

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NEW YORK
NEW REPUBLIC, INC.

1926

253143

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X
IN TERMS OF METHOD

“A method which permits us to determine only cases of stereotyped activity and leaves us helpless in the face of changed conditions is not a scientific method at all, and becomes less and less practically useful with the continual increase of fluidity in modern social life.”

—W. I. THOMAS.

“In the root sense of the words, instruction is building in, whereas education is leading out.”

—C. P. CONGER.

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ADULT education is a process through which learners become aware of significant experience. Recognition of significance leads to evaluation. Meanings accompany experience when we know what is happening and what importance the event includes for our personalities. A friend comes excitedly into your presence exclaiming: "I have had an experience!" Immediately you become consciously expectant: you want to know what has caused this new vivification of his personality and what interpretation he will place upon it. If you know him intimately, you will make quick guesses: he usually sees difficulties where others see opportunities and therefore you feel certain that his interpretation will be in the direc-

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tion of pessimism; or he sees opportunities where others see difficulties and therefore you know that whatever has happened will be incorporated into his personality as an added increment of optimism. In either case you will be observing a personality in the process of evaluating experience; you see him in a new and dramatic setting and you know that whatever meaning he attaches to his experience it will either enrich or impoverish his life.

The real distinction between educated and uneducated persons is not to be found in such superficial criteria as academic degrees, formal study or accumulation of facts; indeed, formal learning may, and often does, lead people into narrow scholarship and out of life. Educated persons find their satisfactions in bringing knowledge to bear upon experience, and the best-informed person is still ignorant if his

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knowing is not also a lively ingredient of his living. But it is not wholly correct to say, "Bring knowledge to bear upon experience"; knowledge, rather, emerges from experience. Intelligence is the light which reveals educational opportunities in experience. Life is experiencing and intelligent living is a way of making experience an educational adventure. To be educated is not to be informed but to find illumination in informed living. Periods of intellectual awakening are correctly named "enlightenments" for it is then that lovers of wisdom focus the light of learning upon experience and thereby discover new meanings for life, new reasons for living.

Our lives are successive valuations of experience: in youth we need to extract from life its highest yield of emotional experience (how fatal it is when schools attempt to make little

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intellectuals out of children who need so much to *feel* the world!) but if intelligence does not enter to temper, to give meaning to emotions, we shall grow old without growing up. Growth should be a process of integrating emotions with thought, an evolving capacity for feeling more deeply and thinking more clearly. Educational experience spans the whole of life. And experience proceeds from any situation to which adjustment is made with accompanying mental release. Experiences can never happen twice for we move forward into time as changing organisms; education, by the same token, can never stop without abandoning personality to the barren existence of instinctive, habitual responses. Even cynics who pretend that all experience ends in illusion continue to intellectualize their illusions, to search for the meaning of meaningless life.

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Conventional education has somehow become enslaved to a false premise: knowledge is conceived to be a precipitation, a sediment of the experience of others; it is neatly divided into subjects which in turn are parceled out to students, not because students express eagerness or interest, but because the subjects fit into a traditional scheme—so much mathematics, so much history, so much language, et cetera, and above all so much regard for disciplinary values as to make even the study of interesting subjects an uninteresting task. Happy the student whose teacher knows more than his subject. And brave the teacher who dares to reveal his special subject in the context of the whole of life and learning.

Subjects, we need to be reminded, are merely convenient labels for portions of knowledge to which specialists have given attention. Re-

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search is probably clarified by the departmentalizing of knowledge; the investigator who calls himself an economist will undoubtedly profit by delimiting the area of his inquiry, by specifying his problems. If, on the other hand, teachers assume that education can be achieved by the same procedure, they will ultimately succeed in reversing the true educative process; their students will be induced to view education as mastery of subjects instead of mastery of life. After all, it requires no more than common insight to perceive that life does not present itself to us in the form of experiences some of which may be labeled economic, some psychic, some social, some linguistic, et cetera. It may be well enough to be taught that there are phenomena which are predominantly economic, et cetera, but there can never be a purely economic experience. The falsest view of life,

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as in the fable of the blindfolded men and the elephant, is one which rests upon some particularism as its point of reference. For example, in purchasing a pair of shoes a man certainly goes through motions which fit the category of economics; but no economist who is not also aware of the psychological cogitations which have preceded the sale can make a proper interpretation of the event; and these mental preliminaries are also accompanied by social implications: one does not buy even a pair of shoes without in some manner influencing or being influenced by others. Did the man buy the right pair of shoes—right with respect to the shape of his foot, the kind of use to which the shoes will be put, his income, his knowledge of leather and shoe-manufacturing? Did he pay the right price? Were the shoes made in a union shop? Was the salesman who sold the

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shoes under-paid? This is, of course, an absurd refinement of illustration but it requires a simple absurdity to demonstrate how pedantic it is to assume that we can understand life by studying subjects.

Many educators who have come to realize that most of their subject-matter disappears from the minds of students shortly after graduation fall back upon the consolation that at least students have been disciplined—they will know how to find knowledge even if they do not possess it. This apology carries the premise another step in the wrong direction: our minds, our personalities, are not repositories into which knowledge is dumped in the hope that it can be reclaimed in the hour of need. If we could fish in the waters of memory for needed knowledge, our catches would be perpetual disappointments: knowledge like fish, either grows or dies.

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And if knowledge grows, it is because knowing was once a part of experiencing.

Arguments directed against the subject-approach in education, even when sufficiently forceful to win intellectual approval of educators, will make little headway until accompanying experiments are made possible. Our conventional system of education—from kindergarten to university—is committed to subjects. Preoccupation with the content of education has so far overbalanced pedagogical thought that schoolmen now find their center of interest in curriculum-making: the process of transforming the school into a department-store bargain counter. The system derives its chief momentum from subject-teaching—a method which is compatible with a perverted and shallow pragmatism and profitable to an industrial order which requires technicians, not

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educated men and women. The method is also congenial to, if indeed it did not evolve from, the conception which views education as something from which one graduates. How could the various “points” and entrance requirements and degree requisites be determined—how, indeed, would any one know when education was finished—if institutions of learning were deprived of this convenient measuring-rod of subjects? Happily, students of the universities and colleges possess wit enough to see the serio-comic response which is made to subject-controlled education: they call those who take it all too seriously “credit-baggers” and “degree-hunters.”

Adult education, happily, requires neither entrance nor exit examinations. Adult learners attend classes voluntarily and they leave whenever the teaching falls below the standard of

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interest. What they learn converges upon life, not upon commencement and diploma. The external tokens of education are removed so that the learning process may stand or fall on its intrinsic merits. (It would be an *experience* for conventional teachers who call the roll, cover the subject in so many weeks, and grade their students within a fraction of a point if they had to make their way as teachers on no other basis than ability to interest voluntary students.) And because adult education is free from the yoke of subject-tradition, its builders are able to experiment boldly even in the sacrosanct sphere of pedagogical method. Indeed, if adult education is to produce a difference of quality in the use of intelligence, its promoters will do well to devote their major concern to method and not content.

Life is confronted in the form of situations,

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occasions which necessitate action. Education is a method for giving situations a setting, for analyzing complex wholes into manageable, understandable parts, and a method which points out the path of action which, if followed, will bring the circumstance within the area of experiment. Since that education is best which most adequately helps us to meet situations, the best teaching method is one which emerges from situation-experiences. Or, in Dewey's words, "The trained mind is one that best grasps the degree of observation, forming of ideas, reasoning and experimental testing required in any special case, and that profits the most, in future thinking, by mistakes made in the past. What is important is that the mind should be sensitive to problems and skilled in methods of attack and solution."⁸¹ We shall have need, before any given situation

is properly confronted, of all the relevant experience of others which bears upon our case—experience which has been stored away in books and that which comes freshly from researches and expert knowledge.

Situations arise when our aims or purposes are impeded, when our wishes fall beneath our present capacities. Conscious effort needs therefore to be directed along two channels: (a) inward toward the wish, its incidence, its validity, its realizability and its integrity with respect to our total personality; and (b) outward toward the circumstances which, for the moment, act as barriers to the fulfillment of the wish. This analysis of the situation furnishes the first set of problems with which we shall have to deal. A college professor writes to explain the situation in which he finds himself with respect to an antagonistic administra-

tion. He is not, so far as his description reveals, aware of any problem arising within his personality. Before a letter—suggesting that he make an analysis of his situation in terms of his past activities and their contributory relation to his purposes—can reach him, he is discharged and now writes for recommendations for another position. He is over-conscious of the outward circumstances and is therefore not capable of sensitizing himself for the inner analysis. The situation has led to no educative experiences and his present mood of resentment will undoubtedly accentuate the personality difficulties which in turn will inevitably lead to similar situations. On the other hand, people who find all the problems within themselves, drop below the level of adjustment through self-depreciation. We have then in every situation a series of problems some of

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which are predominantly relevant to the behaving personality, some to the impeding environment and some to the situation-as-a-whole which includes various forms of relatedness between the individual and his circumstances. Such problems may be classified for purposes of analysis by asking three questions: (a) What part of my personality is here involved about which I need further enlightenment? (b) What further information do I need concerning the various aspects of the impeding environment? (c) What do I need to know about the nature of my relatedness to important phases of the circumstances when the situation is viewed as a whole?

With this much preparation or readiness to meet the situation, we may now proceed to its intelligent consideration, assuming of course, that the situation is regarded as one out of

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which we mean to derive educative experience. A small number of self-dependent individuals possess sufficient perspicacity and diligence to follow the pathway toward action, that is, arrive at solutions for situations which are satisfying to themselves, without further assistance. It is doubtful, however, whether or not their experiences should be called in the highest sense educational. Most of us find ourselves in significant situations which involve others, situations which are explicitly or implicitly social; we might lift ourselves by our own bootstraps but we might also find that we had lifted ourselves out of, above the situation, not through it. Many "self-made" business men find in later years that worship of their maker is not enough; they become almost sentimental in giving credit to their colleagues and workers—after the time has passed when these collabora-

tors might have shared in the attendant creative experiences. Most of us, if we are intent upon making experience yield its intellectual content, need to *discuss* our situations with those who are concerned with us, with those who are likely to be influenced and with those who have special information which is relevant to our needs.

Discussion is more than talk. We think in verbal forms, and on the whole those who are able to vocalize their ideas, transmit them expressively to others, are more likely to live adequately than those who are inarticulate. But mere talking has no more educational content than bellowing, mooing, barking. Conversation may, indeed, turn back upon itself—as it so frequently does among those who use language as a medium of gossip—and come to be a closed circuit: closed with respect to

vocabulary as well as ideas. (A persistent demand has come to express ideas in one-syllable words—to popularize; this is one way of circumscribing language. If an idea cannot be accurately expressed in one-syllable words, it is a falsification of the idea to make the attempt; besides, it degrades those who read or listen by depriving them of incentives for making higher uses of language.) Words become habits—whereupon they lose their teaching function. Think of the countless words spoken aimlessly, pointlessly, futilely about that universal subject of conversation, the weather! Nobody does anything about it, as Mark Twain remarked, and in spite of the fact that we have a rapidly-growing science of weather it is probably true that superstition is more rampant in this sphere of thought than in any other save that of death. The talk of most people about

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weather has gone round and round the circle of sameness until they are unable to make weather-words jump the groove of habit. Consequently they receive no education from a prodigious amount of talk about a fascinating theme. Pointless talk which follows no rules and consists of simple, quick responses proceeding from one person to another may, of course, become extremely entertaining, and this is putting vocal chords and language to good uses; we should, however, value this sort of talk for what it is, namely, recreation, not education. (We might even pay more attention to the playful possibilities of words when used in serious contexts.)

Discussion is organized talk. When two or more persons exchange experiences for the purpose of throwing light upon a situation, and when the confronting of the situation is itself

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regarded as an educative opportunity, a tacit recognition to the effect that certain rules are to be followed, is present. If, for example, the group exceeds five or six in number, it usually becomes necessary to agree upon a chairman or leader whose functions will be to keep the discussion going, to maintain its direction, to enlist active participation of all members of the group, to point out discrepancies and relations, to sum up arguments, facts and conclusions, et cetera. When discussion is used as method for adult teaching, the teacher becomes group-chairman; he no longer sets problems and then casts about with various kinds of bait until he gets back his preconceived answer; nor is he the oracle who supplies answers which students carry off in their notebooks; his function is not to profess but to evoke—to draw out, not pour in; he performs in various degrees the office of

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interlocutor (one who questions and interprets), prolocutor (one who brings all expressions before the group), coach (one who trains individuals for team-play); and strategist (one who organizes parts into wholes and keeps the total action aligned with the group's purpose). The teacher or chairman does not organize discussion—he keeps it in organized channels.³² Whatever he brings to the group in the form of opinions, facts and experiences must be open to question and criticism on the same terms as the contributions of other participants.

Debates also follow rules but these are of no value to discussion. The debater selects his conclusion in advance and then proceeds to gather facts and opinions to prove his case. His aim is victory, not enlightenment. He represents "militarism in the intellectual

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life."³³ In debates we can win only by excluding other points of view whereas in discussions we can achieve only by inclusions. Purposeless conversation may have too little point but debate has too much. The naïve assumption that all questions have two sides distorts debates at the outset; every question has as many sides as there are interests involved and no situation is properly confronted until all relevant interests have been considered. "Where a debate makes much of logic, conference makes more of psychology. It deals not so much with arguments as with reasons. The distinction is important. A man's arguments are the reasons that recite well. They do his heart credit, and his logical head. His reasons—more truly so-called—are things that lie deeper. They are the meaning to him of his own experience."³⁴ Rules for discussion will consequently be compatible with

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the fundamental purpose of conference which is, not to defeat any one, but rather to arrive at a joint conclusion. These rules or guides will moreover be consistent with the aim of adult education which is to make "arriving," not concluding, an educative venture. And, one of the more important rules to bear in mind is this: discussion does not solve situations; it reveals experimental roads to action; real solutions are behavioristic not intellectualistic. After we have recognized a situation, analyzed its involved problems and sought for relevant information and experience, we are prepared to envisage the consequences of various lines of action. Ensuing activities are functions of personalities; each person who sets forth to experiment in the light of the direction provided by preceding discussion will experience unique qualities. Education has been forwarded by

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the group process; subsequent activity brings this educative process within the scope of deeper realities, the realities of necessitous living. Discussion is neither substitute for scientific method nor refuge for those who, being too timid to live experimentally, hide from the actualities of life. Orderly thinking carries us within sight of new departures in behavior—is analogous to hypothesis in scientific method. Activities ultimately validate or invalidate thought, but it is thinking which liberates action from instinctive, habitual forms. Discussion leads to experimental attitudes and also provides a social medium in which experimentalism can count for something. We do not "think through" problems; we act through. Thinking carries us only so far, then action must follow or we become lost in the wilderness of verbalism.

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The situation-approach to learning involves, then, (a) recognition of what constitutes a situation; (b) analysis of the situation into its constituent problems; (c) discussion of these problems in the light of available and needed experiences and information; (d) utilization of available information and experience for purposes of (e) formulating experimental solutions; (f) acting upon experimental propositions with a view of testing, and if necessary, revamping the assumptions which discussion has revealed.* The subject-approach to

* These steps have been arranged in the following order in the pamphlet issued by the Inquiry, 129 East 52d Street, New York City, called *Creative Discussion*:

- "(1) What situation have we here?
- (2) What sort of problem does it show?
- (3) What new information does it involve?
- (4) What action will set us on towards a solution?"

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education, on the contrary, begins by filling the student's mind with specialized sequences of systematized information which he is expected to recall and use in future situations. But, specialized information, content material, will come into the equation of learning with freshness and vigor if it comes when actually needed. Otherwise our activities will be constantly carrying us on into new adjustments while our memories are surfeited with old information.

It will be readily seen that adult education calls for a new kind of text-book as well as a new type of teacher. Under conventional educational systems both teacher and text attempt to make situations fit subjects whereas the demand is to make subjects serve situations. Teachers of youth assume that their function is to condition students for a preconceived kind of

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conduct; teachers of adults, on the other hand, will need to be alert in learning how the practical experiences of life can enliven subjects. The purpose of adult education is to give meaning to the categories of experiences, not to classifications of knowledge. Specialists who wish to participate in adult learning will need to do considerable collaborating among themselves before they learn how to relate their subdivided knowledge to current situations. It is perhaps true that no single group in modern life stands in greater need of adult education than experts, specialists: those who continue to know "more and more about less and less."

Chapter X

31. John Dewey, *How We Think*; Heath 1910; p. 78.

32. For further details in connection with discussion methods, see *Joining in Public Discussion* by A. D. Sheffield; *Foundations of Method* by W. H. Kilpatrick; Macmillan 1925; *Conferences, Committees, Conventions and How to Run Them* by E. E. Hunt; Harper 1925; *The Why and How of Group Dis-*

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ussion by H. S. Elliott; Association Press 1923; *Creative Discussion* and other pamphlets (published by The Inquiry, 129 East 52d Street, New York City).

33. H. A. Overstreet, *Influencing Human Behavior*; People's Institute 1925; p. 253. See also his Reason and the Fight Image, *New Republic*, December 20, 1922.

34. *Creative Discussion*, p. 16 (published by The Inquiry, 129 East 52d Street, New York City).

Postscript

35. See No. 19; p. 287.

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